

FLACSO: Gender and Shifting Population Trends in Protected Areas in the Dominican Hinterlands: Implications of Female Out-migration for Conservation in the Cordillera Central

In 1996, the Office of Women in Development of the United States Agency for International Development launched a five-year project known as the Women in Development Technical Assistance Project (WIDTECH) to support gender integration in development policies and programs. WIDTECH's experience has underscored why it is important to ensure that women are equal participants in development, and how this can be accomplished. WIDTECH's small grants program provided 27 grants worth nearly \$475,000 to non-governmental and community-based organizations worldwide. The following describes one of these projects, offering insights into the many ways that women are improving their lives and well-being, as well as those of their families, communities, and nations. Please visit www.widtech.org for more information on this and other WIDTECH small grants.

Recent years have seen the increasing integration of social, economic, and environmental concerns in the development and implementation of programs. A key aspect of this work is acknowledgment of the role that gender plays in the outcomes of both development and conservation projects. In turn, the specific needs, circumstances, and perspectives of women have become an important part of development planning, research, and analysis.

In 2001, the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) (Latin American Department of Social Sciences) in the Dominican Republic received a grant from WIDTECH to investigate the reasons behind skewed sex ratios and patterns of female out-migration in the Hispaniolan Pine ecoregion of the Cordillera Central. The project considered the implications of these patterns for land and resource conservation and the economic status of women in the region.

The project was carried out in two rural *secciones* (counties) in the Hispaniolan Pine Forest, where residents are herders and growers of coffee, potatoes, garlic, cabbage, onions, carrots, and flowers. Production ranges from small-scale family farms to increasingly intensive, industrialized enterprises.

Research was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews; focus groups; an opinion survey; surveys of fertility, technology use, and household composition; and the mapping of resource use according to gender. Data on sex ratios gathered in 1998-1999 by USAID and The Nature Conservancy as part of the Parks in Peril program were also analyzed.

Findings and Results

- The 1993 Dominican National Census revealed that in areas with low population density, there are on average 118 males for every 100 females. The over-representation of males is particularly acute in communities surrounding parklands, with ratios as high as 127 or 129 males per 100 females in those areas.
- Although there is some evidence that such ratios may be due to a preference for boys over girls at birth (with subsequent favored practices related to food and health care, as well as female infanticide), the most important cause of male-skewed ratios in protected areas is clearly female migration.

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- Although migration from rural, protected areas is high for both men and women, women have been leaving in greater numbers and at a faster rate. Patterns of migration seem to be primarily a result of “push factors” influenced by gender.
- Women have been more negatively affected by the shift from subsistence farming to intensive agricultural production. The sex balance of labor in relation to opportunities in park areas (e.g., livestock rearing, market-oriented farming, and tourism services) now favors men.
- Large-scale land use is consequently under the control of men. The management of land by women remains limited to household yards and family gardens, in keeping with a traditional division of labor between the sexes.
- These changes have caused women to be increasingly seen as a financial liability for economically strapped rural families, who in turn encourage girls to “marry out” or to go live with relatives in urban areas.
- Shifts in the national economy and the emergence of non-traditional sectors such as duty-free industrial zones and commodity processing have expanded urban employment. Women view migration into cities as an opportunity for jobs, social mobility, and independence.
- Female migration to towns and cities has been accompanied by a decline in fertility rates. Interestingly, female migration is also related to increased rates of female education. In both study areas, more boys than girls attend grade school, but the reverse is true at the high school level.

Conclusions

The FLACSO study elucidated key patterns related to the link between gender and conservation. Starting with

data on sex ratios and patterns of rural-to-urban migration, researchers analyzed a range of concerns, including traditional and changing employment patterns and land and resource use in protected areas.

The shift to large-scale, intensive agriculture within park boundaries has not only benefited men over women, but is a trend with negative implications for the health and conservation of land. Future projects should therefore emphasize the greater involvement of women in local political processes and conservation programs, which would benefit both individuals and the environment in the long run.

Furthermore, there is a need for educational programs that emphasize the teaching of gender-based rights (such as land tenure), as well as sustainable agricultural practices and environmental laws and policies. Entrepreneurial activities that particularly target women and reinforce the values associated with conservation of parklands would also be highly beneficial.

Both non-governmental organizations and international agencies should continue to highlight the often dire economic conditions of the men, women, and children who live in parks and protected areas. Efforts should be concentrated on persuading governments to abandon unsustainable land-use policies that result in both environmental degradation and the abandonment of rural areas by peasant women and entire households.

Bibliography

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A Boost to Girls' Education

“The boys weed, the girls study, the work of women doesn’t get as complicated as that of boys, who have to work to obtain money to survive...”

—Study interviewee

“Parents keep the boys and send the girls to study...the girls have more freedom to study.”

—School director